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A COURSE IN LETTER-WRITING

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A person possessed of a good idea is more than likely to become a good person possessed by an idea. Sometimes the idea takes all the rights of possession and carries its property away from safe ground. Here is an idea into the possession of which I have lately come: The whole high-school course in composition can and may be based on and consist of letter-writing. If I say that it not only can and may well be, but ought to be so constructed, I run the risk of being thought carried away by a notion. I should like, therefore, to rehearse all the steps by which I arrive at such a conclusion.

My first thinking along this line was forced by the realization that much of our composition is futile because it lacks, for the student at least, a distinct purpose; it is merely a theme, a composition, a task which can serve only the very distant end of ability some time to write what someone will want to read. You will reply, perhaps, that such is the case with music, with drawing, with sewing, and manual training—indeed, with all the arts and crafts. But is it? In music, it is true, the beginner must learn the scales and practice them; but how many lessons will a good teacher give before the child has memorized a piece to play for mother and her indulgent friends? And what pupil who has studied music for six years could persuade her father to pay for more lessons if she had not progressed beyond the mere exercises? Yet our secondary schools are giving to their writers exercises which could serve for no possible use or ornament—a paragraph of description or a hundred words of narration. In drawing, the high-school student is composing something which, while it may not be published in the school paper or used as a poster for the next basket-ball game, will at least be hung up at home and pointed to with pride. Will his themes receive as much recognition? The student of manual

training will make a spice-box for his mother or a wren house as soon as he knows how to join, and we do not find the sewing classes working their best stitches into samplers now-a-days.

There must, it would seem, be some form of literary composition as immediately useful to high-school students as the apron or the tool-chest or the poster. What is it? What but the letter?

No form of literary composition is so universally used as the letter. The president of the class must write a note to go with the flowers sent to a sick classmate; the secretary of the literary society must notify those appointed to committees, or write an invitation to another society when a spread is to be given; the president of the athletic association must write to managers of other teams for athletic engagements; the debaters must write to their congressman for material, and the chairman of the lecture committee must carry on a business correspondence with the bureau. These, to be sure, are only the more prominent members of any school or class, but I have emphasized in their tasks some of the more difficult and unusual forms of letters needed by high-school students during their course. All students write friendly letters and notes and many of them write business letters connected with their own purchases or inquiry. There is, then, an immediate need, not only to know how, but actually to write letters during the years when high-school composition is being studied. Afterward the need increases for a large majority. All who leave home, all who go into office or clerical work of any kind, write hundreds of letters, and those who do neither of these things find their letters increasing with the number of friends, of duties, and of interests.

Many college-entrance examinations require the student to write in letter form a statement about his preparation or his home surroundings, not, I believe, so much to test his knowledge of correct letter forms as to secure the greater ease and informality of expression which is sure to be found in a letter. The ease of style which may be obtained in a letter is greater than in any other kind of composition exercise. The student puts much of himself into his letter; it becomes an expression of his individuality. Beside this, there is the added assurance given by the definite knowledge of the reader for whom the letter is written, and there is a certain

frankness about a letter which would not be found in any other form of composition. My idea is, then, that an easier, simpler, and more individual expression is cultivated by the writing of letters than by less personal themes.

If we consider the advantages which accrue to the student from a skill in this particular form we shall find many of them. The prospective college student who can write a good letter produces a favorable impression from his first inquiry; an applicant whose letter is correct and clear is asked to call on the manager of the firm to which he applies; the clerk whose letters read well is promoted by his business house; the stenographer who can express her employer's idea even better than he can is paid a large salary. There are few employments in which skill in the writing of letters is not a valuable asset.

So far, I think, you have followed me with assent and have even, perhaps, wondered that I have taken the trouble to set down facts so axiomatic. Beyond this step I cannot feel so sure of any reader's company. I believe that the letter offers the best opportunity for teaching all rhetorical forms in themes of convenient length. One reason why it is the best opportunity is because it centers the pupil's interest in the subject rather than the structural principle involved, but the interest is sufficient and the desire for clearness strong enough to bring the same structural results without as much effort. Not only can the short incident be vividly narrated for the delectation of a distant friend, but longer narration may be interestingly worked out in a series of letters and replies, imaginary or real, which tell a connected story. The best descriptions in the world may be set down in a letter to a former school friend, telling of the new building, the pictures in the hall, or the scenery planned for the Senior play. If the person to whom the student explains how to graft fruit trees, or how to make marshmallows, is out of earshot, the written word of exposition will be clearer and fuller than the usual classroom theme, and long-heated arguments may be kept up in letters between students, even in the same class.

There are many ways of using letter-writing in order to bring good composition results. Sometimes the names of the class may

be put in a box and each student may be asked to draw one. The letter will then be written to the classmate whose name is drawn, who will reply. A good deal of correspondence on school topics has been carried on successfully in this way—successfully in that it has made students acquainted with others they had not known, has aroused interest in school affairs, and especially has improved the written work: for students fear the criticism of their peers more than their teachers. Students may be urged to bring to the teacher any letters they personally need to write. These are corrected and credited instead of other theme work, and so serve a double purpose. Another method is like that used in our modern language classes—of correspondence with students of other schools. Why should not our pupils in Illinois write to high-school students in California and benefit as much thereby as German students do from their correspondence with American youths? A method which is useful in more ways than one is the writing of letters to the teacher. These may take the form of suggestions with regard to English work, inquiries concerning a book recommended, or purely personal letters. Whatever their content, such letters never fail to open the eyes of the teacher to the pupil more than ever before, and replies sent to these letters, provided the teacher has time for them, will be profitable in a different way from the usual theme criticism. It has interested my students that many of the authors of “the classics” have written extremely jolly or wonderfully interesting letters. Some of Thackeray’s, published with the absurd little drawings he used in order to illustrate them, will bring out unexpectedly bright replies in kind. There are two or three books of letters selected from different authors and periods which show what valuable documents in history and personality letters may be. If the teacher be not entirely out of sympathy with the use of models, these may be imitated either seriously or humorously. Mention was made in my class one day of the old-fashioned *Compendium of Polite Correspondence or Complete Letter-Writer*, and one of the boys offered to bring a copy which he had at home. The class was more than amused by its stiff politenesses and by the idea of ready-made letters, so modern collections of a similar kind were suggested. Some wrote entirely absurd models for

unheard-of situations and some wrote quite sensible examples of much-used types of letters. There are delightful examples of letters written in verse.

If any of these latter methods are employed, the purpose of the work should be made definite by the plan of collecting the best for publication in the school paper, or of typewriting and binding them together for inspection in the English room. The plan already suggested of writing long stories entirely in the form of letters is popular with the students, and some good fiction may thus be provided for the school magazine or the programs of literary societies.

There are, of course, the usual dangers of going to an extreme on any given subject. Difficulties arise when we try to confine written composition to letters. I am not sure, for instance, that unity and coherence are as easily taught in the letter as in other themes, since a newsy letter has so many subjects; the students might tire of letter-writing if it were their only written work; the graduate of the high school might consider the letter the only form of composition he was capable of writing. There is, however, little fear of these dangers, for while the regular written themes would, in such a course, be letters, there would certainly be a call for some long papers in the study of literature and history, and the regular oral themes would break the monotony and give training in other literary forms. Nevertheless, there may be other kinds of written work—such as reporting, for instance—which have most of the practical qualities of the letter and which should also be employed for composition-teaching.

Making allowances for these possible exceptions, I am still sufficiently possessed by my idea to believe that the high-school course in composition can, may, and ought to be largely made up of letters, since these, more than any other written form, appeal to the student as practically useful to him.